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TAGS: KZ NATO PREL

SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: PROGRESS ON PFP TRAINING CENTER, BUT CONCERNS REMAIN ON NATO COOPERATION

Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Steven Fagin, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Kazakhstan appears poised to move forward on opening up a Partnership for Peace (PfP) training center, as it had promised to do by the end of 2008. However, concerns remain about progress in Kazakhstan's cooperation with NATO. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Tugay Tuncer, Astana-based NATO liaison officer for Central Asia, told polecon chief on January 9 that Kazakhstan appears ready to move forward in opening up a regional Partnership for Peace (PfP) training center. Tuncer had previously informed polecon chief in November that the training center effort was largely stalled, as Kazakhstan did not take part in the annual PfP training center meeting in Monterey in October and had moved the proposed site of the training center to a building in extremely bad condition.

¶3. (C) According to Tuncer, Deputy Defense Minister Sembinov assured a visiting NATO School assessment team in December that Kazakhstan was committed to opening up the training center by the end of 2008, as it had originally promised, and that Defense Minister Akhmetov firmly supported adhering to this timetable. The assessment team and the Defense Ministry came to an agreement on next steps. The Kazakhstaniis promised to upgrade the training center building, finalize a curriculum by March, and expeditiously appoint training center personnel. NATO in turn will send experts to assist each month for the next three months, and another assessment team will come to Kazakhstan in April to review where things stand.

¶4. (C) Tuncer explained to polecon chief that while the latest news regarding the PfP training center is a positive sign, he remains concerned about other developments in Kazakhstan's cooperation with NATO. Tuncer said that Kazakhstan intends to subscribe to only 80 Individual Partnership Plan (IPP) activities this year, down from 180 last year. (Note: The Kazakhstaniis told Tuncer that 180 was too many given their capabilities. They only managed to actually participate in about 90 activities last year. This, they stressed, is the reason they are subscribing to fewer this year. End Note.) In addition, Tuncer claimed that Sembinov had intended to visit NATO headquarters in Brussels in late January to reinforce Kazakhstan's commitment to NATO, but Akhmetov decided to nix the trip.

¶5. (C) Tuncer also reminded polecon chief that the Ministry of Defense last year reduced the size of its NATO cooperation office from ten staffers to just three. Minister Akhmetov told NATO Special Representative Robert

Simmons in November that he had made this staffing cut because the quality, not the quantity, of the personnel is what matters most. However, according to Tuncer, the three current staffers are weak in comparison with staffers previously assigned to the office.

¶6. (C) Comment: Tuncer contends that there have been increasing problems with Kazakhstan-NATO cooperation since Akhmetov replaced Mukhtar Altynbayev as defense minister in January 2007. Akhmetov's actions -- he took, for example, eight trips to Moscow during his first eight months as minister -- certainly indicate that he has pro-Russian inclinations. That said, we believe the principal problem with Akhmetov is that he does not have the breadth of professional experience to fully understand the potential benefits of enhanced cooperation with western partners, including NATO. In contrast, Deputy Defense Minister Sembinov has gradually come to grasp the pluses from productive mil-mil ties with the U.S. and West, and has been a staunch supporter of both our Humvee and Huey-II helicopter programs. Akhmetov and Sembinov's differing views on this issue are reflected in the internal rivalry in the Defense Ministry between their respective factions -- a rivalry which complicates our ability to work effectively with the ministry. End Comment.

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